

Al Gore is near the end Nina Barrett just got started; The former U.S. VP is more preacher than politician at his climate leadership training seminars, encouraging a new generation to rise up

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Byline: Dan Zak The Washington Post

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Body

The man in the pulpit had the posture of a preacher who had not tired of tribulation.

"Half of all the living species on this planet will disappear on our watch when we're assigned responsibility," the man said, voice starting to thunder. "How do we take on board the meaning of that?"

The church was hot. The choir members fanned themselves with their programs, which read "A Moral Call to Action on the Climate Crisis." The man in the pulpit was listed as "Former Vice President," but the title felt wrong. There in Ebenezer Baptist Church, in his eighth decade of life, Al Gore was something other, something more, especially as he summoned the voice of a future generation to chastise his own.

"You could describe with your scientific instruments - all the digital devices and computers and artificial intelligence and consumer goods - but you couldn't understand the time you were living in?" Gore growled, face flushed with rage, fist pounding the pulpit. "You could not discern the CENTRAL FACT OF YOUR LIFE? Which is that it was YOUR responsibility during YOUR lifetime to prevent the worst TRAGEDY in all of human history?"

A young woman from Raleigh, N.C., squeezed in the eighth row of pews, stopped taking notes to applaud. Nina Simone Barrett was 6 when Al Gore ran for president. She vaguely recalls the disappointment of her grandfather, who grew up in segregated Alabama, as he watched a fellow Southerner, a good man, win a plurality of votes, but lose the office. Now, a whole generation later, Barrett had arrived in Atlanta for Gore's climate leadership training, a three-day barrage of hope and fright and boredom and motivation.

This was the 40th time Gore had captained a training, but the first in which he had included an interfaith service, where spiritual leaders would cast climate change as a matter of morals and justice.

"It's only the first day + I truly feel empowered!!!" Barrett wrote, sitting in her pew. Like the other 600 students at the training, she had a lifetime left on this troubled planet, and the man in the pulpit, a baby boomer creeping toward his life expectancy, was drafting her to save the world after he leaves it.

Albert Gore Jr. was 20 years old when he learned that the Earth was warming. One of his professors at Harvard had been monitoring carbon dioxide from the top of a volcano in Hawaii, and his data showed an acceleration of the greenhouse effect. Gore was shocked to realize that environmental peril was not limited to local incidents of pollution. It was a planetary problem. After he became a congressman, Gore invited his old professor to testify on Capitol Hill with other scientists, to help one generation educate another.

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In his 40s, as a senator, Gore dove into the Caribbean to touch dead coral, and peered through a submarine periscope at the translucent underside of the Arctic. The struggle to save the planet, he wrote in 1992, must be "the central organizing principle of world civilization." In 2006, he startled the world with *An Inconvenient Truth* and then launched a \$300-million (U.S.) education campaign to turn alarm into action.

People would approach him on airplanes, on the street, to tell him how he changed their lives. But had he changed the world?

"If I said there weren't times when I felt this was a personal failure on my part, I'd be lying," he lamented a year and a half ago in *An Inconvenient Sequel*, which you probably didn't watch or even hear about because you've already seen the Al Gore show, starring an ex-politician who flattens doomsday into charts and graphs.

But lately something's happened to Al Gore, or at least the public persona of Al Gore. It's like he's reawakened his inner Baptist and drawn on the protest movements of his youth. Last spring, at the urging of his daughter Karenna Gore, he met the Rev. William Barber II, a board member of the NAACP who helped resurrect the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign.

It was supposed to be a quick hello at the dedication of the lynching memorial in Montgomery, Ala., but it turned into a partnership: Gore, the clairvoyant of Davos, fluent in techspeak and Scripture, who can summon the forces of venture capital and diplomatic clout, and Barber, leader of a moral revival, who condemns ecological devastation as a sin against the poor, and won a MacArthur "genius" grant for fusing divergent coalitions into a united front.

This year, the two men visited central Virginia to rally against a pipeline station and rural Alabama to decry shoddy sanitation. Both locations were home to poor minority communities, worlds away from the nearest glacier. Those experiences had now translated to programming at Gore's training in Atlanta, where a majority of panellists and many attendees were people of colour.

"There would be no need for us to battle climate change if we had not closed our eyes when communities of colour, and low-income communities, were being poisoned," said the Rev. Leo Woodberry, a pastor from South Carolina, during a panel titled "Ensuring Climate Equity."

The ballroom, crowded with 2,000 trainees from 48 states, murmured with approval.

"Absolutely," said Nina Barrett, all the way back at table 129, carefully taking notes.

She was born in the Bronx to an immigrant from Jamaica and a former girl scout with roots in Alabama. Her maternal grandparents moved north to New York City in search of a better living, and her mother did the same by moving Barrett and her siblings back south, to Virginia Beach, where homes were affordable and education was stronger. By third grade, she wanted to be a lawyer and by sixth grade, around the time she was baptized, she was reading about Betty Shabazz, the wife of Malcolm X.

At William Peace University in Raleigh, she majored in political science, interned for two state senators, became president of her class. On graduation day, in 2016, she posted a photo of herself and captioned it: "The little girl from Gunhill projects is now an educated Black woman."

She wanted to make policy and end intergenerational poverty, so she embarked on her master's degree in public administration at North Carolina Central University, a historically Black institution. Last year, she conducted research on food deserts and saw a link between environment, health and poverty. She raised funds to send pallets of drinking water to Flint, Mich., where her mother's elderly aunt was living without. Barrett started arranging the issues in her mind. A local problem was really a collective problem. An environmental threat was also a social one.

When the Poor People's Campaign started looking on campus for potential climate leaders, a professor encouraged her to apply for the training; the Rev. Barber and his son were alumni, and both were working with Al Gore's Climate Reality Project, which had been feeling internal and external pressure to diversify its coalition and harness the power of Indigenous and minority communities.

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When it came to leadership in the green movement, "women of colour are still on the outside looking in," wrote environmental sociologist Dorceta E. Taylor in her 2014 study of diversity in environmental organizations. And now the climate problem, and a leadership opportunity, had reached 24-year-old Nina Barrett.

Climate change encompasses so much, she thought at first. Where do you even start?

She started by applying. And on the night of March 13, in the middle of her spring break, she embarked on the first solo trip of her life, to go hear what Al Gore had to say.

While Barrett was in the air, calming her nerves with Cardi B and gospel music, Gore was in his suite at the Four Seasons Atlanta, futzing with the slide show. There was a slide about birds dying midflight from heat exhaustion in Kuwait City. A slide showing the rescue of an elderly woman from her flooded home after Hurricane Florence. A slide about how carbon dioxide was being released into the atmosphere faster than at any time in the past 66 million years.

It was 641 slides in total, representing a lifetime of experience and a torrent of data. Much of it was grim, though the final 80 slides showed progress in renewable energy and cause for optimism.

"This is just too much," Gore said, tapping on his MacBook, marvelling at snowmelt in the Andes Mountains. "We can't cover it all."

He knew that he had a hard message. He knew that he was a flawed messenger. For decades, he had asked himself how he could sharpen his points, how he could connect more meaningfully. Atlanta was an opportunity to try once more.

The next morning, he was dressed in the dull blues of corporate camouflage, but onstage he spoke with fire about the civil rights protests of the '60s. Students had fuelled the sit-ins across the South, he said in the giant ballroom of the Georgia World Congress Center, and now students across the world are striking for the climate. We're at a tipping point, he told the ballroom, because young people are coming to the forefront.

At table 129, Nina Barrett was ready. Notebook out. Pen poised. Climate, justice, her desire to break the poverty cycle - "all of these things kind of align," she said to her table mates, "but in an indirect way." In loopy handwriting, she took notes during each speaker, each panel.

"Race matters. Place matters."

"Moral and ethical responsibility."

"We can't wait!!"

Gore was often onstage, pedantic as ever, but he was also speaking a language that was familiar to her. "The climate crisis is also a social-justice crisis," he said while interviewing community leaders from Louisiana and North Carolina.

"Environmental racism," he sneered after describing how four million tons of coal ash were disposed of in Uniontown, Ala., which is 90 per cent African American.

"Oh my God, we need to fix this," Barrett whispered when Gore displayed a map of the country blotted with deaths related to fossil-fuel pipelining. He said that more than half the Black population of the United States lives within 50 kilometres of a coal plant, that the death rate of Black children from asthma was 10 times higher than that of white children.

"TEN. TIMES. HIGHER," Gore boomed, and Barrett flashed back to her 9-year-old self, at a family reunion, fainting from an asthma attack. She had grown up in a working-class neighbourhood of Virginia Beach that was 20 kilometres northeast of a coal plant.

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Nina, this is exactly why you are here, she thought. Your story is part of this statistic. This is why you need to be involved.

That night, a confused Uber driver dropped her off a couple blocks from Ebenezer church, which put her in the path of the former vice-president. He was just arriving in a black Mercedes-Benz with his small security detail. She approached and asked for a photo, and they put their arms around one another.

"Thank you for coming," Gore said, and she tweeted the photo along with: "Just met @algore !! It's been a long day, I'm smiling hard, super excited lol."

Backstage at Ebenezer, Gore needed to rest his bum knees and study his remarks. He settled into a chair, his slacks revealing a worn pair of black cowboy boots, many soles faithfully departed. He had been going for 12 hours and still had three more to go. You've got to learn how to work, his father would tell him on the family farm in Tennessee, and Gore, approaching 71, was still learning. He'd trained 19,000 climate leaders, all over the world, and Rev. Barber had reminded him that were always new people to reach, and old barriers to kick down.

When the former vice-president ceded the pulpit to Barber, the reverend ordained him "Brother Gore," a prophetic servant.

"God has given you grace, in your latter years, for that which is far more important than you did in your former years," the reverend said, pivoting his hulking frame to Gore. "The Lord said, 'Hell with the president, I need you to save the Earth, man!'"

Gore blushed and guffawed as the audience rose to its feet. It was a high praise from a holy man, but Gore was under no illusions; he knew that no one could change the world like a U.S. president. He did not know that, eight pews away, Nina Barrett felt like a torch was being passed, and that by the following week she would help start a chapter of the Climate Reality Project on her campus in Raleigh.

"You cannot separate the fight against ecological devastation and the fight against racist voter suppression, and the fight against systemic poverty," Barber was saying, in closing. "Standing against environmental injustice is God's work. And we must do it together. There's an old hymn that says, 'May the work I've done speak for me.' When those future generations remember us, may the work we did speak for us."

When Albert Gore Jr. reaches his 80s, Nina Simone Barrett will be midway through her 30s, and there will be more than 8 billion people on Earth. When she is in her 40s, a flooding event like Hurricane Sandy could threaten New York once every five years. When she is in her 50s, Charleston, S.C., will be experiencing 16 times more tidal floods. This century, her century, the American Southeast is expected to warm up to 8 degrees Fahrenheit.

The first day of training had been filled with those omens, and Brother Gore was right: It was just too much. But feeling the burden was only part of the work. Here, in church, was the other part. Barrett felt blessed, ecstatic, charged by a movement that needed her immediately.

"If you weren't ready before," she wrote in her notebook, "be ready now!"

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